

Title: Ugly and more ugly
Text: Judges 9
Theme: Ugly politics
Series: Judges
Prop Stmtnt: “Whatever feels good” won’t feel good for long.

Read Text (selected verses) 8.30-31; 9.1-6; 22-23, 28, 45, 49, 52-57

Consider the following situation: Larry was beating his girlfriend Alicia because she had been sleeping with other men when Shawn and Justin broke into their house to rob them. After robbing them, stabbing Larry and assaulting Alicia, Shawn and Justin were driving away when Cheryl, who was drunk, ran a red light, hit their car and killed them both. The whole thing is a mess. There is no hero. Before anyone became a victim, everyone was a villain.

Judges 9 is a mess too. Since Abimelech is not a judge, his story is generally overlooked. However, this story is important for a couple of reasons. 1) This is the story about the first real attempt at making a king in Israel. As such, 2) this is a very political chapter in the worst sense of the word political. Politics and polity are not bad words but we tend to think of them in a negative light because we experience the results of idol-driven politics versus Jesus-driven politics. This chapter describes bad policy and bad politics. Therefore, I am going to preach this text by pointing out two things: 1) Here is what the text is saying and 2) Here is what the text is preparing us for.

I. Politics as “usual”

What happens when you put two selfish toddlers into the same playpen where there is only one toy? You witness politics as usual. Politics is not simply the world of Lansing, Washington D.C. or our local city councils and school boards. As Jonathan Leeman writes, “*The story of politics is the story of how you and I arrange our days, arrange our relationships, and arrange our neighborhoods and nations to get what we most want – to get what we worship.*” The two toddlers use whatever is at their disposal in order to get what they are worshipping at the moment, which is a toy. Politics is the means. (Slide - illustration)

“If it feels good, do it. Follow your heart. Be true to whatever your heart is telling you to do. Don’t let anyone restrict you or deny you of anything you want.” To those of you over 70, Frank Sinatra sang your tune – “I did it my way.” For those of you under that, it was Bon Jovi’s “It’s my life.” Both of those songs have remained as anthems for so many because they express this fundamental desire of doing what I want and doing whatever feels good. Anyone who dares to say, “No” is the enemy. But, are they really the enemy? What if your heart is lying to you and everyone who is cheering you on is only greasing the road to destruction?

What is going on in this text? Israel has rejected God. God’s laws (OT) are too restrictive. God says such stifling and limiting things such as, you cannot worship other gods, you cannot take God’s name in vain, you have to honor your dad and mom, you cannot commit adultery, you cannot steal, you cannot lie, you cannot covet, homosexuality is wrong. If you sin, you have to offer a sacrifice for that. All of that OT covenant stuff is based on this fundamental reality that

God is the Creator and He is in charge. Man is the creation and he is under the authority of God. God is righteous and he makes laws for man in accordance with his righteousness. However, man does not like God. He does not like living under God's laws, so man is going to get a new god and get new laws. Man is going to get a god who will tell him what he wants to hear and who will take that which is wrong and turn it into that which is right.

The book of Judges is a series of case studies of how that works out. Israel attempts to vote God out of office and adopts other gods to replace God. Gods like Baal and Asherah make engaging in immorality the means by which you worship those gods. What is wrong (and therefore confining, restrictive, and inhibiting of self-expression) to God, is now part of what it actually means to be devoted and religious when it comes to Baal. You do not have to be a genius to see that the worship of Baal and Asherah is not really the worship of Baal and Asherah but it is the worship of self. It is the worship of self-disguised in the form of a religion with ceremonies and rules that attempt to give it an air of legitimacy. Idolatry is the attempt at living out the creed of "whatever feels good." However, here is what you learn. Whatever feels good does not feel good for very long and the "mean, restrictive" God whom you hate because he won't let you do whatever you want is actually a very loving God seeking to protect you from believing your own lies.

Here is the fundamental fallacy with "whatever feels good do it" or "follow your heart." I was going down 696 when I saw a car in front of me with a bumper sticker that said, "Whatever feels good, do it." I was so tempted to just ram the back of that car and then go, "Ahhh that felt so good." I would be doing what they told me to do. But what felt good to me would obviously not feel good to them and that is the fundamental fallacy of following your heart. The same high school or college instructor who slams oppressive religion for limiting self-expression would not be so supportive of a student's self-expression if that student stole the professor's identity on-line and charged \$30,000 on his credit cards, right? If it feels good, do it, does not work very well, when two toddlers are in the same playpen and there is only one toy. How is life supposed to work when there is only one toy?

So, here is life. We want to do whatever we want to do, but we are stuck. Only God can actually do whatever he wants. We are not God and if you want to live as if you are God, you are in for a miserable life. We are bordered. We have limits. We do not have the power we want, the money we want, or the influence we want. So, we try to figure out a way to do that. When we try to work the system in order to get what we want, we have "politics as usual." Politics as usual is what happens when people try to use each other and manipulate the situation to get what they want. This is all laid out for us in the story of Abimelech.

A. Here is an opportunity for me to get what I want. (1-6)

Abimelech's father, Gideon has died and he sees an opportunity to step into a position of power and influence. Abimelech does not care about the people; he cares about himself. However, he needs the people to make him king. He has no "divine right" or foreign power to put him into this position. No prophet has anointed him. He could call himself the king, but that probably won't get too far. He needs the people to make him king.

1. The leader – Abimelech

There are two problems. 1) How do you get people to make you king? How do you get people to make you president, senator, representative, governor, mayor, council member, school board member, or even in some cases, pastor? You tell people what they want to hear and make them feel empowered by you. Now, that is not necessarily a bad thing, if what the people want to hear is right, true, and pleasing to God. Sadly, that is often not the case; and it was not the case here. Abimelech plays a version of the race card but on a smaller level. He assumes that the people of Shechem want power, just like him. His campaign slogan is, 1 for all is better than 70 for none. I am your flesh and blood. (Mom - Gideon's concubine from Shechem, plus the name) I will take care of you. I will give you what you want. Do you honestly think that the other 70 sons of Gideon would do that? I am your blood. I will empower you. So, they give him money from the house of the god Baal-berith and he hires a group of thugs, who for the relatively cheap price of 1 shekel each (after most likely being plied with alcohol) go out and round up Gideon's sons and execute them. There is no turning back now for Abimelech or the people of Shechem. They all have blood on their hands. They make him king.

2. The people – Shechem

Abimelech is attempting to use them in order to get what he wants and they are attempting to use him to get what they want. He tells them what they want to hear and they tell him what he wants to hear. There is no love and certainly no trust. This is an arrangement between two parties who only care about getting what they want. The relationship is not very sticky. It is only as good as it is convenient. When it is no longer convenient, it is over. This is politics as usual. But,

B. What I want, I cannot keep. (7-29)

So, they rent out the top of one of the Renaissance Center towers and are on the rooftop with Shechem's greatest DJ pumping the music in order to keep the party hoppin, when from another tower (Mt. Gerazim actually) they hear a lone voice shouting. It is Jotham, the only son of Gideon to have escaped capture. He warns the people of Shechem through a skillfully worded fable about trees looking for a king (think Aesop's fables) and essentially pronounces a curse on the people of Shechem. You have made a fool a king who will in turn make fools of all of you. He is as qualified as a bramble bush and a bramble bush is good for burning, not for reigning. It didn't take long for his prediction to come true. In three years (v.22) the text says that "God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem." What happens when two parties try to come together and both are attempting to manipulate the other in order to get what they want? It's called a collision. It is just like two toddlers in a playpen with only one toy. The people of Shechem have buyer's remorse. They made an idiot their king and now they want to take it back. So, in order to take back the power they gave away, they start expressing their power. They ambush travelers in the area that makes Abimelech look like a very bad king. What kind of a king can't even control his own country? Well, he is a bad king. These two parties deserve each other. It's like watching the Midianite army destroy itself. Whatever you do, don't interfere, right? What they wanted, they can't have, so the people look for another king who will give them what they want. Abimelech doesn't get what he wants. He wants power and respect, not rebellion.

So now, a guy named Gaal arises. He talks about Abimelech the way Abimelech talked about his stepbrothers. In his speech in v.28 he plays the race card again, doesn't he. It is classic "us versus them" stuff. Now Abimelech gets a taste of his own medicine. So, they rent out the Hyatt Regency and are planning the coup with speeches by Gaal when one of the leaders loyal to Abimelech warns the king about the coup. Abimelech has killed 69 of his brothers for what? For three years of power that is already slipping out of his hands. Gaal is trying to beat him at his own game. Did Abimelech not realize that the same people who listened to him promise to give them what they wanted would listen to someone else who would say the same thing? And, did the people not realize that the man they gave power to in order to kill his brothers could use that same power to kill them? Both Abimelech and the people are using politics. Abimelech is using the power of the kingship to hang on to his power, and the people are using the power of the masses in order to overthrow him. Taking a page out of dad's book, Abimelech who was given power by the people to protect them now turns that against them.

a. **What I get, does not work.** (30-57)

This last section of the chapter is awful. Gaal's rebellion is over before it started and Abimelech, who burns down their tower, killing 1,000 people, kills the people of Shechem who followed Abimelech and now followed Gaal. Apparently the people of Thebez were a problem as well, so Abimelech decides to teach them the same lesson. As he leads his band of thugs to the tower of Thebez in order to set it on fire, a woman drops an upper millstone on his head and crushes his skull. It is obvious that Abimelech is going to die, so he pleads with his young attendant to thrust him through and kill him so he isn't shamed by being killed by a woman. Abimelech ends up dying like his step brothers. Everyone is doing that which is right in his or her own eyes. Moreover, what is "right" is doing whatever feels good in the moment, but whatever feels good in the moment doesn't feel good for very long.

Judges 9 is probably not your favorite chapter in the Bible. But, the section of this chapter I skipped over is actually rather fascinating because it speaks to the very reason for this chapter and book. The sad story of this chapter is politics as usual. What we need is unusual politics.

II. Unusual Politics

What if you put two children into the same playpen with only one toy and one of the kids was bigger, stronger and quicker than the other child? However, what if that bigger, stronger and quicker child loved the other child and wanted to express that love to the other child, so he gave the only toy to the other child and not only did not try to take it back, but found delight in the other child's enjoyment of it? That would be unusual politics. Politics is the means of pursuing what we really want. If what we want is the honor of God and therefore the good of others, then our politics will be leveraging whatever opportunities we have to pursue that.

The word "politics" or "political" has a nasty connotation to it, but we all participate in politics. Polity means laws or governance. We all live with polity. Little children employ politics when they play house. You be the daddy, and I'll be the kid. Our church has polity. The question is, is it good polity or bad polity. Is it politics as usual; where people are trying to get their own way or

is it unusual politics? Jotham's fable actually provides some unusual examples of leadership. The fable centers on a group of trees who want to anoint one of the trees as their king. They approach the Olive tree who is not interested in being king because he would rather honor others with his usefulness than be honored (anointed) with his own oil. The fig tree is approached next and his response is similar. He would have to give up giving happiness to others by providing his sweet fruit in order to be served by others and he does not want to do that. Next is the vine who refuses on the grounds that he would rather give joy to others by means of his wine than be made powerful. Finally, the bramble tree is made king. However, the point is well made. People who are honorable and engaged in helping the community through their business and industriousness are often reluctant to leave what is worthwhile in order to be engaged in politics as usual, which while it may have important titles, is often a ruse for personal power or worse, public corruption. If ugly politics is the norm, then good people tend to stay away from serving, which means that those who do aspire to office often do so for ulterior motives. At the same time, there is a responsibility that has to be borne by the public. If the public does not care, and looks the other way, or puts into power people who tell them what they want to hear, then the people tend to get leaders who look like them and therefore, leaders they deserve.

Unusual politics points to, is seen in and is modeled after Jesus. (Repeat) Judges 9 is here to show us that people cannot bear the weight of their own lives. We need Jesus. We will destroy ourselves with politics as usual. We need unusual politics. If there is no king and everyone is doing what is right in their own eyes, we will have anarchy and destruction. If there is a bad king who does whatever is right in his own eyes and the people rebel, we will still have anarchy and destruction. We need a king who does what is right. Judges is a set-up for Ruth and Ruth tells us the backstory to David and David tells us the backstory to Jesus. What makes David so amazing is that his life often points to Jesus. He is not only the founder of the Davidic line of kings from which Jesus comes, but his life is marked by using the power that he is given in order to give others what they need, not simply to take what he wants.

A. David points to Jesus by his unusual politics.

Saul gave David power, but David did not use that power to harm Saul, even while Saul used his power in an effort to harm David. Later when David was in power, David used his power in many cases to care for his people and not hurt them. There were some failures on the part of David, but he was often a good example of unusual politics. Toward the end of his life he said, *"The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth."* 2 Samuel 23:2-4

A ruler who is just is a wonderful grace of God for his people. Do you not find this amazing that 3,000 years later the Star of David still flies over the nation of Israel? But, one day, the flag of the Star of David will be replaced by the flag of the Son of David, and that flag will fly not only over Israel but it will fly over the entire earth.

B. Christ perfectly shows us unusual politics.

Jesus is the complete opposite of Abimelech. Abimelech wants to use the people to get what he wants and Jesus is willing to be used up in order to give to his people what they desperately need. Jesus lays down his life and takes a cross as his throne and thorns as his crown and a spear in his side as his scepter in order to die in our place and pay in FULL the penalty for the sins of every person who would ever believe on him. That's our King! He does not use his position of power to crush others that he is intimidated by or threatened by because they are better looking, more gifted, or younger. Oh no! He is power! He is all power and he takes all the power that the Father has given him and he shares it so that we would go and make disciples for him. So,

C. The politics of the church and Christians are to look back to the life and death of Christ and look forward to the reign of Christ.

When you are in power, you reflect Jesus by serving for the eternal good of others. When you are under authority, you respond like Jesus in order to point people to Jesus. This is who we are. We are people of Jesus. Our mission is to point people to Jesus. This is a glorious mission. We are ambassadors of Jesus and our church is an embassy of his kingdom. Life here is marked by the life that Christ lived and points to the kingdom that is coming. This life is characterized by the relationship of ruling and being ruled. Within the church elders rule with the authority that is vested into them by the congregation. So, the elders both rule over and are accountable to the congregation, while at the same time the congregation is ruled over but also has the final say over the elders. How should we think as the ones ruling and as being ruled?

What drove the life and ministry of Christ? It was the glorious love of the Father. Listen to John Owen. *“God’s love is like the heavens when, full of rain, they pour down showers to make the earth fruitful. The Father’s love is like a bubbling spring or sparkling fountain, always pouring out water. The Father’s love powerfully beautifies the object on which his love is poured, infusing into and creating goodness in the persons loved. He that loves desires only to do good to the object of his love.”* This is what God does for the people he rules over in love! Our ruling over others is to point to this. Those who are under our care should feel our love beautifying them and feel our desire to do them good. Husbands, your wife should feel this and by God’s grace, you can be a taste of God’s love to her. Elders, the members of this church should feel this and by God’s grace, we can be a taste of God’s love for them. However, there is more. Owens goes on.

“Our love to God is a love which we are bound to give. It is the love of a child. God’s love comes down to us freely and richly. Our love ascends to him in duty and gratitude. God adds to us by his love. We add nothing to him by our love. ... Our love to God is made up of rest, delight, reverence and obedience. By these we have fellowship with the Father in his love.”

The Kingdom of Christ is the reign of a perfect King who infinitely loves his people. It is also the glad and happy realm where the people joyfully respond back in love. It is unusual politics because it is supernatural, of which we, the church are a preview.